THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-APPLICATION DOCTORAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR APPLICANTS: PROJECT BRIEFING

A briefing for potential doctoral applicants and those working with them (e.g., mentors, personal tutors, researcher developers) based on the projects 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' and 'Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications', funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund.

What are pre-application doctoral communications?

Before applying for doctoral study, applicants often contact potential supervisors, departments, doctoral programme directors and administrators in target institutions. This often takes the form of an email but may also include staff referring potential applicants to each other, approaches on social media, or in-person meetings.

For applicants, the most common aspect of pre-application doctoral communications is emailing a potential supervisor asking to work with them. Other aspects include contacting administrative staff to ask about eligibility, admissions processes, funding, and how to approach a supervisor.

"I was super nervous about reaching out [to a supervisor]. I made my partner read the emails that I sent." (Lakeside, PhD student, Arts)

"[My friend] discussed with PhD students and she told me, you know, 'It is possible, it seems possible'. She told me this sentence. And I stuck to it." (Betty, PhD student, Social Sciences)

Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

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What did our research projects involve?

1. **Literature review** on doctoral admissions.
2. **Webpage analysis** of doctoral admissions material on departmental webpages at Warwick University.
3. **Data collection** across Warwick faculties:
   (i) semi-structured interviews with Doctoral Programme Directors and Programme Officers,
   (ii) solicited diaries with doctoral supervisors followed by focus group discussions.
   (iii) semi-structured interviews with doctoral students from minoritised backgrounds.
4. **Video corpus study** of You Tube advice videos for doctoral applicants.

Why should applicants, and those supporting them with their applications, think about pre-application doctoral communications?

Initial communications with a supervisor or an institution form a key stage in gaining entry to a doctoral programme. These communications help an applicant to determine whether they are applying to the right programme/s, and in some cases locating a supervisor before applying is helpful or even required. At the same time, the process of approaching an institution or a potential supervisor can be difficult to navigate, especially for applicants who do not have a history of doctoral education in their families or personal networks.

The research revealed that the content, style and nature of pre-application communications can impact the ways in which supervisors respond to these emails, especially when supervisors are busy and receive many such emails. The briefing therefore offers guidance to support applicants with planning and engaging in pre-application communications.

The research also revealed that, particularly for applicants who do not have direct experience in their networks to call on, the process of applying for a doctoral degree can feel bewildering. The briefing offers suggestions based on the lived experiences of doctoral students from minoritised groups as to how support can be located for applicants in this situation.

The briefing is accompanied by an advice video produced by the project team:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAMezgpbMSA

Recommendations for applicants and those supporting them

These recommendations have been developed in the UK context, with awareness of variation between institutions, including in terms of centralisation of systems versus devolvement to departments.

Finding an institution and funding opportunities

- ➢ **Visit institutions where possible (including virtually) and speak with staff or students online.**
- ➢ **Read the eligibility information on institution/department webpages** before sending an inquiry.
- ➢ **Consider the location of the institution** – where would you be happy living and working?
- ➢ Contact the department if needed to **learn more about the funding process and your eligibility.**
- ➢ **Search for doctoral funding opportunities on social media, departmental websites, job posting platforms,** and across any relevant personal/professional networks.
- ➢ **Consider looking for and applying to a pre-established project that has funding attached** (this is most common in STEM but also exists across disciplines).
- ➢ For contacts and advice on the process, **reach out to teaching staff from your previous studies.**

Searching for a supervisor

- ➢ **Look carefully at the web profile of a potential supervisor to ensure a research topic/area match.**
- ➢ If you cannot locate a potential supervisor for your area, **consider contacting the listed departmental contact for advice.**
- ➢ **Consider your supervisor choice holistically**; think about the balance between topic expertise and their approach to/understanding of any specific needs you may have.
- ➢ **Discuss your potential doctoral project and target supervisor/department/institution with others before making contact**, including: friends, family, relevant people in your network, previous tutors.

Contacting a potential supervisor and next steps

- ➢ Write a **concise email**, with a brief summary on your personal and academic background, and **address the email personally** to the potential supervisor (it is safest to use title + surname).
- ➢ **Make your request for assistance clear** in the email so staff know what you are asking for.
- ➢ Provide as much **detail on your proposed topic of study as you can** and attach a **draft proposal**.
- ➢ Make a **clear and genuine connection to a supervisor's publications/research interests**.
- ➢ If relevant, **share any barriers you face related to the doctoral application process.**
- ➢ **Aim to make contact in plenty of time (a few months if possible) before the deadline.**
- ➢ **Consider following up if you do not hear back after a week.**
- ➢ Cultural differences may arise during the communication process – **remember you can always ask for clarification.**
- ➢ **Avoid contacting multiple academics within one department/institution simultaneously.**
- ➢ If you are applying to multiple institutions, **check that your proposal and email do not accidentally mention the other institutions** you are applying to.
- ➢ **Be open to working on revising/modifying your topic/proposal** and inform your potential supervisor/s about your progress/developments.
- ➢ **Respond to contacted supervisors in a timely manner** and be considerate of their time and efforts when communicating with you.
- ➢ **Do not be afraid to request a meeting (in person or online) to talk further** about your ideas or the proposal.
- ➢ In general, if you are unsure of something, **ask questions**.